

Evaluation of teaching materials education essay



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A mismatch between curricular aims stated in syllabus and prescribed materials vis-à-vis learners' needs has always been a significant challenge for institutions worldwide. Keeping this in mind, this paper strives to find out such mismatches if any and solutions at the undergraduate level at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Significant advancements in the areas of language teaching methods, material designing and adaptation, syllabus designing, testing and evaluation besides effective lesson planning and classroom management, education technology, computer-assisted language-learning, etc. has considerably enhanced the overall efficiency of English as second/foreign language programs throughout the world. A major shift in the teaching approach, over the past few decades, from traditional to communicative has

augmented the advancements in the above said fields. However, there has been an obvious dissatisfaction among the learners and as well as among teachers of English regarding the effectiveness of these English as second/foreign language programs. Such serious issue deserves to be researched thoroughly to find out the causes of the inadequacy of these programs. Identifying mismatches between curricular aims stated in syllabus and prescribed materials vis-à-vis learners' needs can be one noteworthy step in this direction. The mismatches or gaps perhaps generally lead to a failure in achieving the desired goals and objectives of the course. In addition, this affects students' performances in the classroom and in the examination room as well. Students turn out to be underachiever and are generally unable to attain the expected level of proficiency in the target language. Besides these issues, the mismatches influence the effectiveness and adequacy of the English as second/foreign language programs and of the prescribed materials. Drawing on these issues, the paper will try to identify the learners' needs at undergraduate level and will evaluate the suitability and appropriateness of the prescribed material too. The paper will also try to find out any mismatches between curricular aims of the prescribed material and learners' needs and the solutions and suggestions to bridge these gaps in the graduation course offered at the faculty of languages and translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia.

Background

A lot of effective measures have been taken by the Ministry of Higher Education and the concerning educational bodies/universities in Kingdom Saudi Arabia (KSA) to improve the educational standard of the various

academic and professional courses and the overall curriculum to achieve the desired goals and objectives of the courses offered by them. King Khalid University (KKU) is one of the government-run universities situated in the southern part of KSA in a city called Abha. The authorities at KKU are doing their best to offer more productive and effective courses to meet the standards of the world. The intensity and earnestness of their endeavors to meet such standards can easily be discerned by their efforts to recruit professional faculties and experts from all over the world after rigorous straining and billions of dollars of investment in all the government-run education sectors. The KKU authorities are trying hard to offer the best courses under the supervision of expert teachers and educators. The course books are chosen from international publications with wide acceptance and with good market reputation. However, sometimes, the course materials or books are chosen randomly without doing a detailed need analysis of the students, which in return causes unsuitability and inappropriateness of the selected teaching materials or books for that specific group of students in the respective situation. Moreover, an absence of needs analysis also causes a mismatch between the curriculum aims, objectives of the course material and learners' needs. Often these mismatches, lead students to an odd situation where they fail to achieve the desired proficiency in the target language, i. e. English, and hamper the student motivation as well. This study intends to investigate such mismatches and to find suitable solutions for them. The result of the study can provide valuable data for the course designers and authorities at KKU to evaluate further the current graduate program and its contents. In addition, the data will also provide a lead into

new course development, curriculum planning, assessing learners' needs, material evaluation and students centered course design.

Statement of Intent

The selection, gradation, design, adoption, adaptation and evaluation of language teaching materials are of primary concernment for EFL/ESL course designers and as well as for teachers in order to meet the curricular aims and objectives of a course and learners' needs. As there has constantly been a great need to find out what learners and teachers want from the language teaching materials (Tomlinson, 1988); the evaluation of language teaching materials needs to be focused in order to uncover the implied aims of the course materials. This kind of material evaluation will help language teachers and course designers to adapt and design suitable teaching materials and will eliminate possible mismatches between the learners' needs and the curricular aims of the course. The present study mainly focuses on 1) the English language-learning needs of undergraduate students at the faculty of languages and translation at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia, 2) the curriculum aims and objectives defined by the concerned body of the undergraduate program at the faculty of languages and translation at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia, 3) the objectives of the course books and materials prescribed at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia, 2) the curriculum aims and objectives defined by the concerned body of the undergraduate program at the faculty of languages and translation at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. The study also tries to investigate if there are potential mismatches between the curricular aims and the learners' needs. The paper investigates the learners' needs through a survey

and carries out a comparative study between learners' needs and the curricular aims of the undergraduate program to find the potential mismatches if any.

Review of literature

Learning materials are of crucial importance in an ESL/EFL classroom. They play a vital role in imparting the knowledge of English language to the learners and retain the position of succoring devices for the teacher and as well as for learners in the classroom. White () suggests that it is important for teachers make informed and appropriate choices when selecting coursebooks for their students, especially in today's computer age where sophisticated learners demand high standards in materials and presentation. Tomlinson (1998) expounds materials can be instructional in that they can inform learner about the language; they can be experiential as they can offer experience of the use of language; they may be elicitive in that they can provoke language learner into using language; and they may be exploratory when they provide opportunities for learners that lead to discoveries about the language. Despite all these functions, materials are mostly instructional since they act as the main source of input for learners and the language practice that takes place in language classroom. Azizifar (2010) says for the EFL learners, the textbook becomes the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) opine that the textbook is an almost universal element of English language teaching and no teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook. Johnson (et. al.) say teaching materials also vary in their linguistic design, focus, and objectives, making

the choice of a textbook-an integral part of many ELT classrooms-a seemingly formidable task. A competent EFL/ESL teacher may or may not be a good materials developer (Dudley-Evan and St. John, 1998), but all language teachers should be able to evaluate, select and adapt materials so as to ensure a match between the learners's needs and goals and the materials objectives (Nahrkhalaji, 2012). Language teachers and researchers may sometimes expostulate that textbooks restricts the freedom of the teacher because of their closed design and limited exposure to the language and little room for creativity and exploration on the part of teachers (Prabhu, 1987). As Cunningsworth (1984) states, course materials should be the teacher's servant, not his master. Hutchinson (1987) says that material evaluation plays such an important role in language teaching that its potential for influencing the way teachers operate is considerable. He further advocates that material evaluation can and should be a tow-way process which enables teachers not just to select a textbook, but also to develop their awareness of their own teaching/learning situation (Hutchinson, 1987). A teacher should evaluate course materials according to the needs of learners and the curriculum aims and objectives of the course prescribed by the institution. In most of the situations, material evaluation vis-à-vis learners' needs is given a low priority and a sluggish approach drags this serious issue to the last bench.

Many studies have demonstrated that racist attitudes, linguistic biases, gender dominance and cultural prejudices constitute part of the unrealistic view of the textbooks (Clarke and Clarke, 1990; Carrell and Korwitz, 1994; Ansary and Babaii, 2003). Sheldon (1988) says,

according to Hutchinson and Waters, textbook evaluation is basically a straightforward, analytical ‘ matching process: matching needs to available solutions’ (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 97). My own view is that this issue is rather more emotive and controversial for teachers; many would agree with Swales (1980) that textbooks, especially coursebooks, represent a ‘ problem’, and in extreme cases are examples of educational failure. I would like to explore the reasons for such strong reactions, and to put forward possible evaluative solutions. I wish to concentrate on coursebooks because, whether we like it or not, these represent for both students and teachers the visible heart of any ELT programme. The selection of a particular core volume signals an executive educational decision in which there is considerable professional, financial and even political investment. This high profile means that the definition and application of systematic criteria for assessing coursebooks are vital. Supplementary textbooks and materials, on the other hand, may not carry the same burden. The evaluative criteria for these, to some extent, can remain implicit, or be allowed to define themselves more informally in the local situation.

O’Neill (1982) provides 4 justifications for the use of course books. Firstly, a large portion of a coursebook’s book’s material can be suitable for students’ needs, even if not specifically designed for them. Secondly, course books allow for students to look ahead, or refresh themselves with past lessons. They remove the element of surprise in student’s expectations. Thirdly, course books have the practical aspect of providing material, which is well-presented in an inexpensive form. Finally, I believe most importantly, well-designed course books allow for improvisation and adaptation by the

teacher, as well as empowering students to create spontaneous interaction in the classroom (White,).

Models for textbook evaluation

ELT materials can be evaluated through a number of ways in order to assess distinctive features such as reliability, authenticity, validity, adaptability, practicality and several other features that perceived as important by teachers, learners and administrators. ELT materials can be evaluated through different approaches advocated by famous linguists and researchers. Generally, a detailed investigation and analysis of curricular aims, linguistic context, course design, course purposes, learners' needs, methodologies, etc. are found in the core area of these evaluation approaches. Breen and Landline's (1987) model is an extremely complex approach to conduct critical evaluation of materials' aims, appropriateness and utility. Sheldon's (1988) expensive checklist includes a variety of factors related to all aspects of content ranging from graphics to flexibility. Adapting the Bloom's taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, Chall and Conard (1991) proposed an evaluation framework in which the affective processes and cognitive skills that textbook activities required the learners to apply are assessed through a special rating scale called " Question Complexity Rating Scale." McDonough and Shaw (1993) designed a two-stage framework that included a brief external overview to adopt a textbook followed by a concise internal evaluation to adapt the textbook. This model, as described by Nunan (1991), offers a preliminary way to material evaluation and places language learning within the broader context of all learning with a focus on cognitive abilities.

The present model and methodology

Extensive use of widely distributed series of textbooks such as Touchstone, Ventures and lately Open Forum, Well Read series in Saudi Arabia in general and at King Khalid University, in particular, necessitates evaluating the effectiveness of such materials. Touchstone series has recently become very popular in main cities of the country. However, Open Forum and Well Read are opted by KKU administration at the faculty of languages and translation at KKU. In order to uncover the mismatches, if any, between the curricular aims and objectives defined by the KKU administration, objectives of the books and course material prescribed, and the learners' needs; two questionnaires will be given separately to students to find out the learners' needs and whether the prescribed course materials provide desired and valid input for the students; whilst the aims and objectives of the curriculum and the course materials are analysed separately. Then a detailed analysis of the data collected will provide valuable outputs for the enhancement of the current program and a strong basis for future research and investigation.

The Research

The two questionnaires will be used in collecting data. About 100 students from different sections at undergraduate level will be given the questionnaire. The data formulated by the questionnaires will be analysed statistically on a quantitatively basis.

The questionnaires consist of different constituents to assess the learners' needs. The first questionnaire asks students to identify: 1) what language skill do they think is the most important by ranking them, 2) what situations they need to learn English for, 3) how learning English will benefit them, 4)

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their attitudes towards English language, 5) their previous knowledge of English, 6) their intentions to use the language for purposes, such as, for higher studies, better jobs, tourism etc. The students are asked to arrange the language skills from top to bottom, which they think is more important to a less important one and the domains in which they need to use the language. In addition, the students are given some language situations where they feel they actually use English (this will help to assess situational language needs of the students). In this section of the questionnaire has a scale ranging from ' always', ' often', ' sometimes', and ' never'. Furthermore, the questionnaire also consists of questions to analyse their attitudes towards English language and factors which affect their learning process.

In the second questionnaire, questions regarding the suitability of the prescribed textbooks, the quality and effectiveness of the language exercises, relevance of the topics covered etc. were asked. The findings of the questionnaire can assist the KKU administration in future decisions about EFL curriculum development.

The questionnaires were distributed in the classroom and the students were asked to return the filled questionnaire on the next day in order to avoid disturbance of the lesson. Some of the students did not return the filled questionnaire. However, they were asked to submit it a few days after. After a few days, all the questionnaires were collected with a response rate of.....

Data Analysis

(Widdowson, 2007).

Cunningsworth (1995)

Sheldon (1988)

Richards (2001),

Oâ€™Neil (1982)

(Hutchinson and Torress, 1994)

(Tomlinson, 1998)

(schon, 1983)